

## From Me to You: A Video Mixtape

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Assembled is a collection of performative works on video (and one on film) produced between 1993 and 2006, a period coincident with the emergence of the Internet as a publically accessible information source on one end, and the emergence of social media on the other. Most are by artists who work(ed) serially, creating video compilations, mixtapes, zines, or video chain letters. Others share a similar ethos or sensibility. All would, I think, be good to watch in an informal living room screening, with friends, maybe a bottle of wine. It is essentially a compilation about compilations. I have approached the task of selecting videos the way one would approach the task of making a mixtape, which is to say that I have allowed my feelings and empathetic responses to be considered reasonable tools of judgment. A mixtape is, after all, a labour of love, a gift.

This informal type of viewership has typified much of my early experience with video art. Joanne Bristol, my undergraduate instructor at the University of Regina, went to school with Steve Reinke; he gave her *The Hundred Videos* on VHS and she lent them to me. My friend Jason and I watched Jeremy Drummond VHS tapes that he had borrowed from Gary Varro and had forgotten to return. Our friend John sent a nice letter to Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby and they sent him three DVDs of their work in response. We watched them all in one sitting, at somebody's New Year's party. Living in a small city with not a lot of opportunity to see this kind of work in public venues, we consumed video art serially and socially, in our homes, with our friends, on VHS and DVD. It is a markedly different experience. Inserting video art into your private home makes the work more "habitable."<sup>i</sup> Watching videos becomes a participatory activity – fast forward, rewind, pause to chat or do something else, allow the content to slip from foreground to background, to foreground again. "Using a remote control," notes Nicholas Bourriaud, "is also production, the timid production of alienated leisure time: with your finger on the button. You construct a program."<sup>iii</sup>

Early writing about cassettes is quite similar to writing about the utopian potential of the Internet and social media technologies: Consider Pennie Staski and Mark Edwards, in *Cassette Mythos*, an anthology of writings on the revolutionary potential of cassettes, from 1992:

...the best, most cool thing about cassettes is that you can move them from location to location. You can record things and build on them in the privacy of your own home, on the streets, while jamming, at gatherings, from other media sources, and then you can send them to your friends, through mail networks, swap them, sell them, play them at gigs, at parties, on your radio show...they are an incredible means for a huge two-way and multipath exchange and interaction...they are *wonderful* and they *work* because they provide a mode for people to enjoy each other's music/sound expressions in a leisurely, relaxed fashion.<sup>iii</sup>

The artist's videotapes of the mid-1990s to mid-2000s occupy an similarly interesting place in the history of video art, somewhere in the interstices of early experimental video and contemporary social practice. One might consider, for instance, Jinhan Ko's early

video compilations, frequently collaborative and circulated through formal and informal networks, as a precursor to the social practices and service-oriented activities of Instant Coffee, or the *My Heart...* series in relation to video sharing made possible by Web 2.0 technologies and sites like YouTube and Vimeo.

Viewed in a sequence of either the artist's or the programmer/viewer's choosing, these short pieces chart a trajectory "like a narrative that extends and reinterprets preceding narratives."<sup>iv</sup> Themes emerge and are drawn out slowly, gaining some coherence by being part of an episodic work or compilation, but never coalescing into singularity. As a strategy, the compilation of shorts leaves more room for polyvocality, contradiction and intertextual play and avoiding the authoritative tone of a grand narrative.

The themes that do emerge could be characterized as having a certain ethos or sensibility, one well-suited to zine-like modes of distribution and informal in-home screenings. Typically produced with an economy of means and an embrace of lo-fi or handmade aesthetics, the best of these videos are also typified by a sharp and acerbic wit – an uneasy and often unpredictably dark humour that undercuts and undermines the simplicity and ease of the form. Many bear the traces of their predecessors – a self-reflexive tone typified in representations of a body that is fragile, flawed, vulnerable, and bound with unattainable desires. They are introspective, but also social, made with and for others. They are immanently, entertainingly watchable – short, succinct and funny. The artist's stories and gestures elicit an empathetic response, articulate a shared sense of vulnerability, remind us that we exist among others, and provide an unflinching model for relating to others and being in the world.

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<sup>i</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), xxi.

<sup>ii</sup> Nicholas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*. Ed. Caroline Schneider, Trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2002), 39.

<sup>iii</sup> Pennie Stasik and Mark Edwards, "The Cassette: On Popularity and the Myth of Adolescence," in *Cassette Mythos*. Ed. Robin James (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1992), 38.

<sup>iv</sup> Bourriaud, 20.